

"SONG OF CARONI"

Ida Ramesar

A cold wind blew down the trace and sent a chill through Krishna's frayed shirt. He shivered and gazed about his world with a brooding look.

Clutching the bucket in his cold hands he tried to hasten his step. Sometimes it vexed him that he could not walk very fast. When the doctors told him he had polio he thought he would never walk again, and most of the time he praised God that he was able to walk at all.

But this morning he was late and his limp slowed him down. He had to fill the bucket at the standpipe and get back so that Ma could finish cooking and they could get to the fields.

Today was Saturday so there was no school, and he could work side by side with Ma and Pa and help them finish their tasks. Only Ma and Pa worked in the fields now. His big brothers and sisters all went to secondary school and Pa insisted that they spend the week-end studying for exams.

"Ain't no son or daughter of mine go end up cutting cane," Pa would shout.



"Yuh all don't get yuh O level and A level and is all yuh go be good for."

Remarks like this were usually delivered while Pa held a big piece of bamboo so everybody paid attention.

Ma Henry's Rooster sat on her fence and gave a lusty greeting to the dawning day as Krishna hurried past. Mr. Singh's jackass quickly responded to the rooster's call by braying as loudly as he could. A kiskadee perched on a mango tree ruffled his feathers and burst into what he considered beautiful song. Soon bird song rang out from all sides as the bird population awakened. Little blue flowers peeped out from dew-covered grass and Krishna almost forgot to hurry.

When he reached the standpipe he placed his bucket under the tap and turned it on.

"Oh lorts, no water!"

He sat down on the grassy bank and indulged in that favourite Caroni pastime—waiting for water! Behind him the river flowed sluggishly between the bamboo.

Leaving his bucket Krishna scrambled down the bank to get closer to the river. Sitting with his chin in his hands he gazed at the shallow river and remembered when that same peaceful river had caused his village so much heartbreak. That was the time when the village, which so often cried for water, found itself almost completely submerged in it.

Every garden in the area was destroyed. Ma cried

as she watched her crops being washed away. So much work and so much loving care swept away just like that!

Her tomatoes, lettuce, cabbage, cassava, sweet potato, dasheen bush and sweet peppers all disappeared and with them the family's income. He didn't like to think about that time.

Determined that the children must get to school Ma and Pa spent all their days searching for odd jobs. There were days when their bellies growled with hunger but they had managed to survive.

Krishna had just been discharged from the Princess Elizabeth Home and he was not yet ready to go back to school, so he tried to help by keeping the house and yard clean for Ma.

When Vishnu and Radica passed their O levels that year Pa had tears in his eyes as he watched them receive their certificates. Krishna almost burst with happiness and pride that day too. He knew that many days his brother and sister had gone to school with empty bellies and only a plain roti between them for lunch.

Voices coming from the direction of the stand-pipe startled him. As he climbed up the bank he heard the sound of water splashing into his bucket. Wishing Mrs. Balroop and Miss Ali a good morning, he collected his full bucket and headed homeward. Now the sun was warm on his back as he made his way up the trace and he knew Ma was going to be late joining Pa in the fields.

She was waiting for him in the yard and quickly grabbed the bucket from his hand.

"Cheups!" was all she said and raced to the kitchen. She knew why he was late.

Quickly he swept the yard and threw some grain for the fowls.

Then he went inside to drink his green tea. Soon he and Ma headed for the fields to join Pa.

Krishna loved working with his parents during crop time, and it was important to work hard during the six months of crop. For the rest of the year, they would have to depend solely on their garden for the family income.

He knew what Pa meant when he said he didn't want his children to spend their lives cutting cane. He knew how important it was to both Ma and Pa that the children succeed in school. They had spent their lives tasting the bitterness of unskilled labour, but as each child succeeded, all the years of toil and sweat would seem worthwhile.

Pa's greatest joy was his eldest son, winner of an Island Scholarship, now in England studying medicine. Someday Krishna hoped that Pa would be just as proud of him, but he never wanted to become so big and important that he would forget the feel of the hot sun on his back, or the smell of sweating labourers around him, or the sight of his mother's work-blackened hands.

Someday he would build them a fine house with real toilets and taps inside. He would give a big Puja for them and the prayer flags would blow proudly outside for all to see. Ma and Pa would be able to stay at home and rest then, and they would even be able to eat meat everyday if they wished.

The thought of food made him realize that he was very hungry. He looked hopefully at Pa, who would give the signal when it was time to stop and eat. Catching his eye, Pa put down his cutlass, wiped the sweat from his eyes, and began to walk towards the mango tree where they always had breakfast.

Biting into his roti and bhajee, Krishna lay back in the shade. If you didn't work for long back-breaking hours under the blazing sun you could never appreciate the wonderful comfort of a shady tree. If you didn't know how it felt to have real hunger growling deep down in your belly you could never really know just how good bhajee and roti could taste.

Then Pa stood up and belched loudly, the signal that it was time to get back to work.

Sweat rolled into his burning eyes as he stacked the final load of cane. And it was time to go home. He walked like a man between his cane blackened parents and felt ten feet tall.

Pa was the first to bathe when they reached home and Krishna set off again to fill the bucket so he and Ma could bathe. As soon as he and Ma had washed, he made his third and final trip for the day to the standpipe.

A gentle breeze blew down the trace and caressed his cheeks. Mr. Singh shepherded his goats and sheep from the village pasture, closely followed by Mr. Logan with his cows. The jackass watched the whole thing with a great deal of suspicion and finally voiced his disapproval by braying loudly at the sky. The birds called to each other as they got ready to go to bed. The kiskadee continued happily doing his own thing still

firmlly convinced that he was making beautiful music. Ma Henry's rooster gathered his hens together and headed for home. The little blue flowers gently folded their petals and settled down snugly in the grass.

Placing his bucket under the tap Krishna went again to have a look at his river. It continued on its sleepy way only now the setting sun was adding new colour to the scene. The bamboo glowed in its light and added its own sound to the music of the evening. A blue JEAN flew past his head as Krishna climbed back up the bank to collect his bucket.

Stretching himself, he gave a big yawn.

Another day was coming to an end in Caroni and he was glad to be alive. Glad to have a loving Ma and Pa and brothers and sisters who cared. Glad to be able to watch the river at the close of day. To see the world wipe the sleep from its eyes in the morning and watch it go to bed at night. To lay his aching body down on the bed he shared with his three brothers and listen to the crapauds and crickets serenading the night. And to know that somewhere up above God was watching and caring about everyone and everything.

Sighing contentedly, Krishna picked up his bucket and headed for home.